

**‘She’s *our* friend and she’ll *kill* you!’:
Dissecting Eleven’s role as a Beweaponed Girl in the
Narrative of *Stranger Things***

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As a behemoth of mainstream television, *Stranger Things* (2016-2026) has dominated the last decade of popular culture with its decisive cocktail of sci-fi, horror, and coming-of-age drama blended with an ensemble cast of teens and adults. In addition, there is a strong dedication to replicating the cultural zeitgeist of 80s nostalgia. Even though it is centered on a core group of pre-teen boys for whom the mystery kicks in as one of them goes missing, it also concurrently introduces a strange girl with telekinetic powers possessing the ability to communicate with their lost friend. In the following years, *Stranger Things* cemented the character of Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) as the nexus of these interconnected events, and situated its narrative centrality on the spectrum of stories that locate the weaponized girl as an extension of ‘girl power.’

‘Girl Power’ emerged as an explicitly political concept of Third Wave feminist discourse on girls’ political subjectivity during the 1990s, but has since been deployed in popular culture and mainstream media as a de-fanged version of

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girlhood that is “deprived of this political axis” (Taft 69). On the postfeminist scale, which is understood as a critical study of the “decline in support for feminist politics” and the rise in aestheticized feminism that is divorced from the core values of resistance, equality, and intersectionality that are central to the feminist movement, *Stranger Things* has situated Eleven’s girlhood in a strange space (Hall 881). It grants her a symbolically empowered role within the narrative as a beweaponed girl, while continuing to reduce her access to personhood, and diminishing her ability to achieve a politically aware self. It thus becomes the space where the presence of Eleven as a beweaponed girl is not only central to the development of a story that requires that she be designated as an axis upon which the paranormal horror rests, but also correlates her entire existence to the symbolic role of loss of innocence for the other teenage characters. Ultimately her role dissolves her when the need for the weapon ceases.

This essay examines the overarching superficiality of postfeminist Girl Power in *Stranger Things* by studying the role of Eleven as a decade-long fixture in the phenomenon of beweaponed girls. To that end, this essay first traces the history of beweaponed girls in popular media, including Charlene (Drew Barrymore) from *Firestarter* (1984) and River Tam (Summer Glau) from *Firefly* (2002), and cross-examines the through-lines that converge in Eleven as a character. It then locates Eleven’s place in the narrative in relation to other characters, juxtaposing her relationship with Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine) against that with Chief Hopper (David Harbour) to examine the binary of weaponization (use and disuse) under the lens of parental control. This section also delves into her relationships with other women and girls, namely Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder), Max Mayfield (Sadie Sink)

and Kali Prasad (Linnea Berthelsen) and examines not only why romance forms a central axis of Eleven's insular development long before personhood does, but also how the character of Mike Wheeler (Finn Wolfhard) plays into this facet of her life. Furthermore, it dives into the treatment of these beweaponed girls through their singular role as girl savior, and contrasts Eleven's purpose against that of Kali's within the narrative of *Stranger Things*, questioning the decisive narrative choice to paint both these girls as tragic characters.

History of the Girl as a Weapon

The concept of the beweaponed girl is littered throughout horror fiction, most famously in Stephen King's works like *Carrie* (1976) and *Firestarter* (1984), both of which *Stranger Things* draws heavy inspiration from in the portrayal of Eleven (Breznican; Oberhelman 3). Following the story of a young girl who is capable of spontaneous pyromancy, *Firestarter* parallels Eleven's story not only in the experimentation and governmental control exercised in the formation of these powers, but also in the difficulty that both Charlie (Drew Barrymore) and Eleven face in controlling these powers, as these abilities are emotionally motivated with a tendency to emerge under specific emotional strain. Charlie starts spontaneous fires whenever she is angry or upset, signaling the volatility of her abilities and her personhood—something that is easily weaponized by the government forces who are intent on using her for their own militaristic purposes. It draws a direct parallel to Eleven's telekinetic powers and the heavy military constraints she is put under to refine and channel these abilities at the beck and call of these same forces. Much like Charlie's parents, who had been drugged as part of an experiment resulting in telepathic powers in both and causing

genetic material to be passed down to Charlie, Eleven's mother undergoes a similar experimentation under the scientific branch of MKUltra. It is worth noting that the name of the operation finds its roots in the real world human-experimentation project that was carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America and headed by Sidney Gottlieb under the direction of then-CIA director Allen Dulles in 1943 (*Project MKUltra, The CIA's Program of Research in Behavior Modification*, 65). In the fiction of *Stranger Things*, Eleven's mother is one of several women who were injected with a specific strain of supernatural blood in a bid to produce children inherently capable of telekinesis, a flagship practice launched by Dr. Brenner ("Chapter Five: Dig Dug" 0:47:12) and replicated by Dr. Kay (Linda Hamilton) ("Chapter Five: Shock Jock" 0:44:13). However, it is interesting that in both cases, the mother is rendered an inactive element in the story – with Charlie's mother killed by the government and Eleven's mother lobotomized through electroshock "therapy." These actions not only alienate the beweaponed girl and forcefully deprive her of a relationship with her own mother, but also render the mother's role null and void the second she is done giving birth. The mother is basically a machine – a fetal container or assembly line.

This trend of manufacturing the beweaponed girl as an exercise of military power continues in *Alien: Resurrection* (1997), where the character of Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the sole survivor of *Alien*, is cloned with DNA spliced together with that of the xenomorph, creating an Alien/human hybrid capable of superhuman strength and reflexes. Weyland-Yutani Corporation's previous failure to breed xenomorphs for military use forced them to turn to utilizing Ripley's body as a weapon, in an attempt to shape her into something dangerous.

In the process, Ripley is turned into a vessel devoid of personal affect—reflected in the shaved head she shares with Eleven—and treated as an asset, left to navigate “a twilight state between being an independent person and a lethal device” (Morano 38). This mirrors Eleven’s personhood and purpose amalgamated into armament under the scientific division headed by Dr. Brenner, whom she is conditioned to call “Papa.” Eleven’s body was also manufactured via injecting her mother with Vecna’s blood (resulting in her enhanced powers); in this way, her life can be seen as resonant with Ripley’s journey. It is reflected not only in how they are both hybrids of the greater monster antagonist, but also in their tendencies towards self-actualization and search for independent personhood, while rejecting the patriarchally designated be-weaponization that attempts to exercise ownership over their bodies.

A similar exercise in control and coercion is seen in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; Morano notes that the creation myth of the First Slayer is attributed to the three shaman Shadow-Men, who weaponized her by “infusing demonic agencies to fight on their behalf” (“Get It Done” 7.15) and attempted to reduce her role in the narrative as an extension of the vested interests of these patriarchal forces (Morano 39). As an extension of this legacy of “women as weapon,” Buffy (Sarah Michelle Geller), like Eleven, is also conditioned into becoming a weapon but it is only by applying her human upbringing that she can insist on her autonomy as an individual. Buffy, however, isn’t the only be-weaponized girl in the Whedonverse, and perhaps the closest to Eleven’s circumstances would be the psychologically tortured and neurologically altered River Tam of *Firefly/Serenity*. River’s place in the Whedonverse is characterized not only by her volatile nature, but also by the fact that her brain has repeatedly been violated by the Alliance,

resulting in a lack of complete control over her body, speech and mind. As noted by Aaron Livingstone, River struggles with “internal discontinuity that perpetually defines her through a method of relation” (Livingstone 12), which has been explained by Michel Foucault in *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, as biopower (Lemke et al. 5). As such, her definition of herself is relational, defined by her fellow crewmembers, her brother, and even the audience as a damaged and deranged site of violence and power. Thus, River experiences an acute loss of bodily autonomy, with physical torture and psychological scarring being the benchmark of similarities that she shares with Eleven and the other heroines in the legacy of weaponized girls. Therefore, as the noose of the narrative tightens around these women made into weapons, it is worth examining not only how these influences have shaped their, and Eleven’s own, personal journey, but also her definitive understanding of herself in relation to those she is surrounded by, family and friends and the symbolic role of patriarchal influence that looms over her attempts at exercising free will and independence.

The Role of Relationships, Familial and Friendly

The defining goliath that haunts every facet of Eleven’s life is the figure of “Papa,” Dr. Brenner, the mastermind behind the MKUltra project (in show canon) and the parental figurehead for Eleven and the other children with supernatural abilities. He embodies the figure of patriarchal control exercised by the government in an attempt to regulate and designate the bodies of these children as bioweapons, framed as a project of national importance. Zachary Griffith identifies the subjective interpolation of history and nostalgia portrayed in the 80s aesthetic of *Stranger Things* as an “emphasis on reconstruction

through hypermediated reference,” stating that the touchstones deployed by the show (Reagan, heteronormativity, neons and synths, kids on bicycles, *Dungeons & Dragons*) cedes “interpreting grounds to the audience” by evading denotative clarity (8). As the story progresses, the narrative positions secret Russian bases under Hawkins as antagonistic, thereby validating ghosts of McCarthyism and submitting to a revival of the Red Scare (“Yates v. United States, 354 U.S. 298”). Griffith notes the liberties taken in this “aestheticized abstraction of a historical conflict” that paints all Soviets as one-dimensional villains, calling it “a cartoonish vision of unflinching Soviet bad guys determined to do evil, whatever the cost” (9). Therefore, in the fiction of *Stranger Things*, Brenner’s deep roots in the US Government juxtapose him as one of the ‘good guys’ against the shallow-caricature of the Soviets giving him the grace of nuance that is becoming of a seasoned antagonist yet missing from the portrayal of their clichéd Russian counterparts. Brenner’s actions are therefore outlined throughout the series as a specific extension of the United States’ conflict with Russia during the Cold War, and throughout the extent of the third season with Steve (Joe Keery) and Robin (Maya Hawke) uncovering a secret Soviet bunker underneath the mall with Erica (Priah Ferguson) and Dustin’s (Gaten Matarazzo) help this is where *Stranger Things* situates itself politically (“Chapter Five: The Flayed” 0:17:42). The experiments conducted on the children to enhance these powers serve only to appease the interests of the United States military complex, and further weaponize the ‘Upside Down’ with Eleven as their node of access to it. While Eleven’s deference to Dr. Brenner is not extraordinary she was raised to fear and obey him, after all it is worth noting that he defends the several cruelties levied on her as necessary for her “own good and protection” not as a

person but as a weapon (“Chapter Eight: Papa” 0:57:51). For instance, Brenner compels Eleven to kill a cat with her mind, an act which is defined as a hurdle that must be overcome to strengthen her powers. Eleven’s failure to kill the cat is what earns her detention and confinement once again (“Chapter Three: Holly Jolly” 0:33:28). It therefore incentivizes the children to erase empathy and focus solely on amassing power as evidenced when Eleven gets bullied by the other children in the lab. Here, Papa doesn’t discipline the children or teach them to respect one another, but emphasizes subjugating through power, asking Eleven to “show them” by focusing on the shame and humiliation she feels and to use it as motivation to defeat them (“Chapter Five: The Nina Project” 0:56:40). Even though Eleven barely manages to complete one half of the task and fails at the overall objective, the existing structures make it impossible to relish even one iota of progress, since all of them are weapons of the same hand, subjugated to serve at the will and command of those who keep them chained like a leashed dog.

Using Donna Haraway’s framework, Oberhelman notes how familiarity, including the usage of the name “Papa” for Brenner, paints Eleven as an “illegitimate offspring [or seized child] of militarism and patriarchal capitalism” and “a product of the sinister governmental forces that produced her and cultivated her dangerous powers” (Haraway qtd. in Oberhelman 7). Thus, Eleven’s desire for freedom and the subsequent attempts at escape from the compound not only make her a threat to this patriarchal arm of control but also backfire on those she surrounds herself with since her mere presence puts them in danger’s path due to Brenner’s need to recapture her. By weaponizing the girl, the powers that be have handed her the means of defiance, contingent on the fact that

she ought not realize her own ability to finesse it, for they are rendered obsolete if she does. It is reminiscent of Ripley's journey, where her enhanced abilities as a cyborg enable her to undercut the masculine state apparatus seeking to contain her, and challenge the hierarchical systems of power that protect her 'makers.' Eleven struggles with the same dilemma, as her attempts at freedom and personhood hinge on her ability to not only escape the confines of these structures but also eviscerate them entirely.

Chief Hopper, who effectively takes on the role of Eleven's guardian, contrasts with Brenner's method of parenting by discouraging her from openly using her powers for her own safety and restricting her ability to socialize beyond the immediate family group of father and daughter ("Chapter Two: Trick or Treat, Freak" 0:07:32). Although Dr. Brenner's relentless pursuit makes Hopper's caution warranted, his insistence on constraining both her powers and social circle limits Eleven's personal development. Thus, Hopper, too, effectively isolates Eleven by exercising a form of patriarchal control, insulating her from developing social relationships with anyone outside of their "family." This negatively impacts Eleven's socioemotional development, and prevents her from forming healthy relationships and support systems beyond Hopper. While his intention might not be to exploit Eleven, he achieves an oppressive sense of suffocation regardless. Narratively, Hopper contrasts with Dr. Brenner, serving the role of the caring father-figure to Eleven, insisting on never putting her in danger, and later on in the final season, refusing to let her join him in his hunt for Vecna in the Upside Down ("Chapter One: The Crawl" 0:34:32). Despite the hurdles he had erected to prevent Eleven from coming along (which she clears with time to spare), Hopper's fatherly intent of shielding Eleven

deprives her of autonomy and stunts her. Throughout the series his overprotectiveness disrupts not only her growth and understanding of social etiquette but also her development of speech and the ability to communicate her needs and wants. In effect, it also limits her capacity to make a choice for herself, turning the cabin into a softer version of the prison in which Brenner locked her away. This isolation is further intensified when Hopper interferes in Eleven's relationship by lying to Mike and intimidating him into pulling away from his 'daughter' resulting in her first heartbreak ("Chapter One: Suzie, Do You Copy?" 0:40:28).

This restricted and heavily controlled exposure to human interactions limits Eleven's metric for evaluating friendships and causes her to latch onto people quickly – evidenced in how she hastily elevates Mike, her only friend, to boyfriend status. Without a clear understanding of boundaries, Eleven ends up using her powers to spy on Mike, thereby violating his privacy. Their romance is premature and is pushed persistently as a heteronormative structure for her to conform to, since Eleven hasn't even developed a proper sense of self yet, let alone a foundation from which to pursue romance. Their relationship has developed little beyond their initial impressions of each other – where Mike was bullied off a cliff and Eleven stepped in to save his life, taking on the role of the protector ("Chapter Six: The Monster" 0:35:47). In his eyes, Eleven never really gets to be a girl, but becomes a 'superhero' – and throughout the extent of the narrative, Mike is unable to separate Eleven as a person from this role that he has assigned to her. Mike's impression of her relies on this Other-ing of Eleven, as he continues to see her through that lens for years to come. It sets the tone for the perception of Eleven altogether when, perched on the edge of that precarious cliff, Dustin announced to the

bullies that “she is our friend and she’s crazy! [...] she will kill you!” harkening to Eleven’s power and her volatile nature, underscoring her as a threat to be wary of (“Chapter Six: The Monster” 0:40:57). Although her friends do reciprocate in their attempts to help and rescue her, most of the series is contingent on Eleven exercising her powers to defeat the evil, standing as the only person capable of taking on the creatures of the Upside Down, and therefore, being the sole savior capable of protecting the people she cares about.

It is worth noting that thus far, all of Eleven’s chief relationships have centered around the men she is positioned against, and in that sense, tied to the role she can perform as either a relief for their own tragic story, their own character development, or their own specific sinister agendas. Scenes of Eleven sharing moments of bonding with the other women are sparse, but somehow far more influential in shaping her personhood. One such incident is her attempt at friendship with Max after a continued frustration with Mike, which results in what is probably one of the most heartfelt scenes of the show. The episode is peppered with montages that explore the joys of carefree girlhood Max and Eleven experience together, including sleep-over parties and attempts at decentering boys from their lives (“Chapter Three: The Case of the Missing Lifeguard” 0:01:42). Despite Hopper’s warnings that Eleven should continue to hide, Max takes her new friend on a tour of the mall, and helps her buy new outfits, to redefine her expression of self (“Chapter Two: The Mall Rats” 0:25:18). While clothes are thematically expressive of developing personhood and self-expression, the girls still engage in consumerism while searching for ways to enjoy “girlhood,” which can be read through a postfeminist lens of the girl as a consumer. It somehow plays on the stereotype of girl power

being conflated with consumerist purchasing power as remarked in the *Fortune* article of December 1997, that 88% of girls between 13 to 17 “just love to shop” (Munk 136). As further noted by Taft, we need to be concerned about the fact that girlhood is produced as a space of consumption at the expense of girlhood as a space of cultural production or social and political engagement (Taft 74), something that does not happen for Eleven and Max. However, it is under the inspiration of Max’s friendship that Eleven is no longer dependent on Mike’s company and is quick to recognize the latter’s lie. She effectively utilizes her new-found feminism by exercising her independence and dumping him in front of his friends to drive home the point.

Significant to note as well is that throughout the series, the story never tries to enrich Eleven’s relationship with other young girls, like Erica, or even the other teenage girls like Robin and Nancy (Natalia Dyer). Eleven has few relationships with people who understand her and know who she is. In that similar vein, her interaction with Joyce Byers remains very limited, operating in implications rather than direct interactions that propel any deeper actual on-screen development. It is, however, worth underscoring that it is only when Eleven moves to California under Joyce’s care that she is able to get a fresh start and is finally able to experience social and interactive elements of human relationships, which vastly improve her social skills and understanding of boundaries. Despite having been restricted in her use of language for the majority of her life, Eleven makes strides in California, growing as a person and performing moderately in class, to the point that her communication skills blossom well enough that she could give an entire presentation in front of her classmates (“Chapter One: The Hellfire Club” 0:11:59). It provides her with

that sense of normalcy she craves, and although the circumstances are vastly different, Joyce's hands-off parenting style with very little exercised control suits Eleven's personal growth. Despite this arc of normalcy, Eleven is still an emotionally unregulated person, and struggles to express herself when upset, as her initial upbringing rewarded acts of violence. It is here, under embarrassment and duress, that Eleven lashes out at her bully Angela (Elodie Grace Orkin) and injures her with a roller skate, which results once again in her being perceived as a threat and feared by the other "normal" folks when she is apprehended by the police thereby upending this "normal" chapter of her life ("Chapter Two: Vecna's Curse" 0:34:36). Even though she exercises her power to fight back against injustice, she is reminded that the only true language she has ever been taught is violence and she notes to her own utter dismay that even Mike, who is supposed to be her closest confidant and boyfriend, regards her with fear, thus reinforcing the narrative of monstrosity that has been thrust upon her since the beginning, even after years of trying to unlearn it.

Self-Identity, Girlhood and Growth

One interesting point about Eleven is that her introduction to the narrative presented her as an androgynous character, with a shaved head and devoid of voice altogether; as a result, those she interacted with outside the lab, like Benny, mistook her for a boy. As pointed out by David Oberhelman, using the framework of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," Eleven's origins "create a new hybridized *mélange* in which both the masculine and the feminine occupy the same narrative space" (Oberhelman 4). By using Haraway's posthumanist critique on gender, Oberhelman argues that Eleven's tie to the

monstrous demogorgon signifies that she is both the monster and the monster fighter, placing her in a dual role that breaks down gender-essentialist categories and acts as a feminist antidote to an otherwise highly gendered genre of story.

However, as the seasons progress, Eleven is shown to express a desire to capitalize on her feminine side. It doesn't help that her only defining relationship outside of that with adopted father, Hopper, is with her boyfriend Mike. Her relationship with Mike, which has only blossomed under duress, struggles under the lack of it, for they do not know how to express interest or understanding towards each other or bond as individuals interested in a relationship. Where she had previously only known how to be a weapon, Eleven now learns the role of a girlfriend before she learns how to be a girl; and the narrative chooses to substitute romance for personal growth. The Duffer Brothers' insistence on continuing to push this relationship through the final season despite the lack of drive from either party only solidifies how misguided the hand of the narrative is. What had initially started as a process of creating connection turns into a dull sludge, a shackling of Eleven to premature ideas of romance. She still has not learnt to express herself yet but she kisses Mike at the Snow Ball, a scene that is presented as a happy ending and not the dystopian representation of a young girl's growth stunted by heteronormativity ("Chapter Nine: The Gate" 0:57:48). Later in the series, she refuses to tell Mike when she is struggling, conveying her fear of abandonment and lack of self-assuredness as she defines her own personhood by the worth of her relationship with Mike. This fear, doubled with her understanding of herself as a "monster," comes to a head at the roller rink, and her dissatisfaction with the relationship is further echoed when Mike repeatedly calls her a "superhero."

Despite the fact that Mike means it as a compliment, Eleven interprets it as the alternative role she has to fulfill as an extension of a weapon, a role that is devoid of personhood, and one she needs to fulfil to make herself seem appealing to Mike (“Chapter Three: The Monster and the Superhero” 0:17:51). She notes that while she has repeatedly told Mike she loves him, Mike has not signaled that he reciprocates her feelings romantically. As highlighted by Laura Tisdall, even though Mike knows exactly what El needs from him, he won’t tell her to her face that he loves her until Will lectures him about how much El needs him and encourages him – during the *actual* moment of truth – to finally spit the words out (Tisdall 6). He is only able to admit that he loves her under duress, when Eleven is fighting Vecna and her life is once again at stake – creating a dangerous pattern where only grand gestures of self-sacrifice can get him to express his affection for her (“Chapter Nine: The Piggyback” 1:31:41). Thus, Eleven’s role in the story takes on the dual role of superhero and bioweapon – for the two are different faces of the same coin. The hierarchy of her roles run in an order: monster-fighter first, daughter second, girlfriend third – and if she is at all a person, that comes last. Thus it is an exercise in dehumanization, intentional or otherwise, that is perpetrated both by those who intend to shield her as well as those who intend to exploit her, and this act of depersonalization is one that Eleven is starkly aware of. She takes on the mantle of superhero even as such a role is uncomfortable to her, especially when she lacks powers and feels inadequate. Her desire to get her powers back and become that superhero once more is what drives her towards Dr. Brenner again. It would have her succumb to the cruelties of his actions to satisfy what the narrative needs from her – not

existing as an ordinary teenager, but instead as a monster and monster-fighter alike.

This desire for girlhood permeates the entirety of Eleven's story although her interactions with Max expand on this desire for female companionship in her life through this singular female friendship, Eleven barely interacts with Erica, Robin, or Nancy, even when their storylines collide. The most significant relationship Eleven has with another girl is with Kali. Introduced in Season 3 as a mirror of Eleven, Kali was raised and bred in the same military compound for the same purpose of weaponization. What sets Kali apart from the other children is how she features in the same core memory for Eleven as her own mother. Kali's escape from the facility remains something Eleven herself was never able to do, and as such, Eleven's deep admiration for Kali comes from wanting to share and understand the life Kali has made for herself, far away from Hawkins. Eleven's interactions with Kali come only after she has run away from both Hopper and her birth-mother's house. At this point Eleven is starkly aware that even the latter could not support her needs, nor does their reunion carry the sense of belonging she had hoped for. Eleven's journey and subsequent interaction with Kali is instrumental in redefining her relationship with her own powers, as she also expresses a desire to learn how to control them in the symbolic hope of breaking the control they have over her. Kali, in the meantime, has grown into her own person, and taken up roost on the opposite side of the law. Kali's friends and adopted family consist of kids around her own age, dressed in punk fashion to express their nonconformist attitudes towards the government and governmental organizations. Kali's journey to self-hood is not covered by the narrative, but paves the route for Eleven's, who follows in Kali's lead and is adopted into the group at her

behest, since Kali is the de-facto leader. Kali's anger towards those who had abused her, however, is sharper than Eleven's, and is reflected in Kali's desire and ability to follow through on the promise of exacting revenge on one of the men who tortured Kali under Dr. Brenner's orders.

Vengeance shapes a great deal of Kali's perspective of the world, and the desire for revenge is central to her character's ruthless approach to her circumstances utilizing her own powers for vigilantism and trying to teach Eleven to do the same. Even as Kali gives Eleven a punk makeover, teaches her the importance of rage, and the ability to channel it, her moral boundary does not align with Eleven's. When given the chance to pull the trigger and kill the man who hurt both of them, Eleven refuses to bend, and thwarts Kali's attempt at committing cold-blooded murder ("Chapter Seven: The Lost Sister" 0:31:26). Eleven is unwilling to inflict the same pain as had been caused to her and it is here that Kali and Eleven's ideologies bifurcate, rendering Kali an extremist, whose righteous thirst for blood and bleak outlook on the world is not one that Eleven can share. It is worth noting that Kali also lacked the kind of support system that Eleven had, and her experiences as a street-urchin since her escape have significantly colored her worldview. Eleven's capacity for empathy is a credit to the care and nurture that her Hawkins family and friends have shown for her, and having learnt from Kali how to finally harness her power and control it, Eleven chooses to return to her family and fight to protect them instead, channeling the anger inside her despite it being the very thing that had taught others to fear her ("Chapter Seven: The Lost Sister" 0:40:08). It is an act of reclamation of her own powers for her own self, thus taking control of her own weaponization not as a military asset but to fight for what

matters to her and her alone. It is at this juncture of bifurcation that Eleven really comes into her own, and actively chooses her own place in the world for the purpose of unleashing her powers in a way that she sees fit.

However, Eleven's fate in the long run is a strange one, since after this point, the story loses sight of what to do with her. While one can argue that Eleven's return to Dr. Brenner is a mark of relapse during her weakest moment, it is a repetitive motif and does not enrich her journey so far with any complexities beyond just being hunted by the US Military as she has been hunted for the last four seasons. Even when Dr. Brenner is killed, and Eleven walks away instead of saving him, the fifth season supplants him with a new mad scientist, Dr. Kay, who begins hunting Eleven and recreating Dr. Brenner's experiments on women's bodies. She becomes the new face of patriarchal control and the arm of the same ruthless force the motivations do not change, nor are they transformed. Her being a woman is only superficially symbolic of the same appropriated Girl Power, significant in that she doesn't challenge any of the hierarchies and simply continues ruling Brenner's empire with an iron fist. After successfully capturing and drugging Kali once again to extract her lifeblood for their own experiments, Dr. Kay becomes the face of this endless exploitation and continuation of the cycle. Lkening her to a vampire, Kali recollects how the blood drawn from her was supplied to drugged and unconscious pregnant women in an effort to produce a new crop of weaponized children ("Chapter Five: Shock Jock" 0:46:09). It is a tried and tested plot and only serves to show the cyclical nature of this weaponization. Once rescued by Eleven from this dehumanizing situation, Kali proposes that even after they defeat Vecna, she and Eleven should end their lives as a way of taking themselves off the game board and rejecting their

roles in this never-ending cycle violence and weaponization against their will. While it is an exercise of their free will, the narrative choice to kill off the character of a young woman who has long held the centrality of the franchise is a controversial act. As *Stranger Things* commits to this plan, Eleven's act of self-sacrifice following Kali's death closes the Upside Down forever and is a mark of a chapter closing ("Chapter Eight: The Rightside Up" 1:20:25). She vanishes just as she came into the lives of these children in Hawkins, ever so suddenly signaling the presence of her own life as an allegorical coming-of-age experience for her friends, and a loss that shakes them into adulthood.

It is a tragedy that not only reiterates that a monster-slayer is defunct the second that monster ceases to exist, but signals a truth far worse than a simple allegory. For a series that initially played with the ambiguity of her gender identity, once Eleven chooses to feminize herself, *Stranger Things* succumbs to the oldest Hollywood trick the death of the woman reinforced to satisfy the character arcs of the people surrounding her. At this juncture, where her personhood has only been superficially explored in ten years of television runtime, her role as a bioweapon causes the narrative to treat her as dispensable once her purpose has been fulfilled. Eleven's apparent death forms the foundation upon which Mike's grief is built, and Hopper's is reinforced. One has to ask: although the narrative makes it Kali's choice to suggest the suicide and Eleven's choice to sacrifice herself and die, do any of these choices ever exist in a vacuum? These decisions have been written by the Duffer Brothers, after all, and they were unsure enough of this choice to feel the need to include a failsafe scene, an improbable probability of Eleven's survival despite it all not even convinced in their own minds to put their weight behind the

very deaths they have orchestrated. Kali and Eleven are the only main casualties at the end of the series, as victims who have occasionally crossed the line into aggressors. When the narrative does not have any use for them anymore, they are condemned to die, in choices that are framed to be of their own making.

In conclusion, it is perhaps apt to refer to Eleven's ending through the poem "The Woman Dies" by Aoko Matsuda:

She dies to provide a plot twist. She dies to develop the narrative. She dies for cathartic effect. She dies because no one could think of what else to do with her. Dies because there weren't any better story ideas around. Dies because her death was the very best idea that anyone could come up with.

'I've got it! Let's kill her off!'

'Yes! Her death will solve everything!'

'Okay! Let's hit the pub!'

And so, the woman dies. The woman dies so the man can be sad about it. The woman dies so the man can suffer. She dies to give him a destiny. Dies so he can fall to the dark side. Dies so he can lament her death. As he stands there, brimming with grief, brimming with life, the woman lies there in silence. The woman dies for him. We watch it happen. We read about it happening. We come to know it well.

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